

Becoming a Health Coach

A career guide for
a growing field.

Overview

The field of health coaching offers a truly exciting and rewarding opportunity for individuals who are passionate about health and wellness to actively collaborate with clients and patients, assisting them in unlocking their full potential to live healthy lifestyles. From managing stress and setting goals, to eating healthy and regularly engaging in physical activity, the health coach serves the unique role of empowering people to take ownership of their own health, and to discover their own motivation for lasting behavior change.

Although the health coach profession is continuing to expand, this report offers a guided view of its current state, and addresses emerging areas of opportunity that will further allow the profession to thrive. Those areas especially include positions in fitness, healthcare and workplace wellness.

Additionally, this report features unique insights from currently practicing health coaches across a wide variety of settings who highlight how their knowledge, skills, and passions have translated into diverse, fulfilling careers in an evolving field.

“People don’t just need an exercise program or a diet plan. They need an expert who can guide and empower them. They need someone who can connect with them in a way that makes them believe they have the ability to make meaningful and lasting changes.”

CEDRIC BRYANT

ACE CHIEF SCIENCE OFFICER

SAN DIEGO, CA

Health Coach Defined

Just over a decade ago, health coaching was broadly described as the practice of health education and health promotion within a coaching context, to enhance the well-being of individuals and to facilitate the achievement of their health-related goals.¹

As the field has continued to evolve and take greater shape in recent years, the International Consortium for Health & Wellness Coaching (ICHWC) has arrived at a more formalized definition of health and wellness coaches. The organization describes them as professionals from diverse backgrounds and education who work with individuals and groups in a client-centered process to facilitate and empower people to achieve self-determined goals related to health and wellness. Successful coaching takes place when coaches apply clearly defined knowledge and skills so that clients and patients mobilize internal strengths and external resources for sustainable change.²

While education-based interventions in which the emphasis is placed on transferring knowledge can serve as a great complement to primary care, education-based interventions alone prove insufficient.³ The addition of coaching, which focuses on increasing client and patient internal motivations, skills and confidence to manage their conditions and set achievable goals has been found to be significantly more effective than health education alone.⁴

SCOPE OF PRACTICE

Although there are a number of health coach training programs available, each with its own specific standards and guidelines, the majority of health-coach programs feature similar key components, such as motivational interviewing, cognitive-behavioral techniques and solution-focused goal setting.⁵ Individuals who engage in coaching relationships are expected to do the following:

- + Apply effective communication skills, such as the use of open-ended questions, affirmations, reflective listening, and summarizing to help a client or patient increase motivation and ownership of making a change
- + Help clients and patients develop achievable and measurable goals to monitor success and motivate ongoing behavior change
- + Help clients and patients develop and exploit strengths to support successful behavior change

Health coaches partner with clients and patients using a collaborative, thought-provoking process to help individuals discover their internal motivation and enhance their overall levels of health and well-being.

Health Coach Defined

Ultimately, a coach's scope of practice is determined by state policies and regulations, as well as credentials, education, experience, competencies and skills. It is the responsibility of the health coach to adhere to the laws in his or her geographical region, as well as to abide by the defined scope of practice and avoid legal ramifications of providing services outside that professional scope. The following actions, among others, are outside defined scope of practice for health coaches:

- + Counseling or therapy
- + Nutrition prescription and meal planning
- + Exercise prescription
- + Diagnosis of medical or mental health ailments
- + Recommendation or sale of supplementation

Furthermore, health coaches should know and follow the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans and exercise programming guidelines from leading professional organizations, such as the American Council on Exercise (ACE), the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA), the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) and the American Heart Association (AHA). Health coaches should also be familiar with the position statements for specific populations developed by these and other healthcare organizations, as well as remain up-to-date on current dietary guidelines jointly published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Health coaches should maintain the same level of professionalism as others in client-professional relationships, such as physicians and patients, and clients and attorneys. In fact, health coaches should strictly adhere to all privacy laws and best practices when handling client information.

“Health coaching offers the opportunity to positively enhance the wellness of individuals from a more holistic perspective, imparting real, meaningful, and lasting change.”

JESSICA MATTHEWS

ACE CERTIFIED HEALTH COACH AND
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HEALTH AND EXERCISE SCIENCE
AT MIRAMAR COLLEGE IN SAN DIEGO, CA

Industry Landscape

Economic transition, rapid urbanization, and unhealthy lifestyle practices such as tobacco use, unhealthy diet, insufficient physical activity, and the harmful use of alcohol are among the risk factors contributing to the burden of chronic diseases.⁶ As of 2012, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that approximately half of all adults—117 million people—have one or more chronic health conditions, such as heart disease, stroke, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and arthritis.⁷ With 75% of health expenditures in the United States attributed to treating chronic diseases, it is imperative that this issue be a top priority for the nation.⁵

ADDRESSING AN EPIDEMIC

Amid the current public health crisis, research clearly indicates that health coaching produces positive effects on clients' physiological, behavioral and psychological well-being and on their social lives, with statistically significant results in areas of weight management, physical activity, and physical and mental health status.⁴ Based on the evidence supporting the health benefits of behavior-change counseling, in 2014 the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) released a recommendation that overweight or obese adults with at least one additional risk factor for cardiovascular disease be offered or referred for behavior-change counseling interventions that promoted healthy diet and exercise for cardiovascular disease prevention, specifically identifying health and exercise professionals, along with a select group of other trained allied health professionals to provide these services.⁸

117
MILLION
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Health coaches are uniquely poised to serve as guides for sustainable change, due to their knowledge and skills in helping individuals to preserve and restore their health and those seeking to enhance overall wellness.

Industry Landscape

Health coaches are currently enjoying rewarding careers working with individuals and groups. This often incorporates the utilization of technology in the form of delayed or real-time communication, including the use of phone, Internet, email, video conferencing, and social media, as well as face-to-face interaction in a wide variety of settings, including but not limited to:⁹

- + Clinical settings, such as hospitals and private medical offices
- + Large corporations and small businesses
- + Health insurance companies
- + Community centers
- + Educational institutions
- + Holistic health facilities
- + Health clubs, wellness centers and fitness studios
- + Client and patient homes in the case of self-employed coaches

Given the evolving nature of the field, the hourly rate and yearly salary for health coaches can vary greatly based on a number of factors, including place of employment, years of professional experience and types of services offered. A 2013 ACE survey of currently certified professionals nationwide found that part-time health coaches on average earned \$33 per hour whereas full-time health coaches earned an average of \$51,219 annually.¹⁰ As noted above, however, pay ranges varied greatly based on previously mentioned variables. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 2012 that professionals could earn upward of **\$86,810.11** demonstrating the notable professional growth opportunity that exists in the field.

“At the time I decided to become a health coach, I was working in an intensive care unit and many of the patients that I cared for in the hospital had chronic diseases that left them debilitated, critically ill or dying. My objective in pursuing the health-coach certification was to learn additional strategies to assist my clients in avoiding this side of the healthcare spectrum.”

THERESA BROSCHE

ACE CERTIFIED HEALTH COACH AND
ADJUNCT NURSING INSTRUCTOR IN SPOTSYLVANIA, VA

Future of the Profession

One of the primary goals of healthcare reform and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) of 2010—also referred to as ‘the ACA’—is to achieve the triple aim of better health, better care, and reduced cost. Part of this includes primary care redesign. In the ‘old’ model, healthcare providers struggle to deliver high-quality care to patients with chronic diseases in 15-minute visits, especially when many of these patients do not or cannot follow through on provider recommendations.¹²

In light of this, the CDC recommends that self-management training serve as a key step in improving patient-centered outcomes, including quality of life.¹³ Health coaches are perfectly poised to help clients acquire the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to reach their own health and wellness objectives in a meaningful and personalized manner that is aligned with their unique individual values. With a focus on establishing healthy eating habits, consistent engagement in physical activity and implementing strategies and solutions to overcome perceived barriers, this aim of health coaching—referred to as patient activation—has been linked to positive change in behaviors relevant to chronic disease.¹⁴

EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES IN HEALTHCARE

As a result of the high financial and societal costs that preventable chronic disease places on the U.S. economy coupled with the need to offer affordable, high-quality, readily accessible health-related interventions as outlined by the healthcare reform law, there is an imperative need to re-examine the way in which chronic diseases are treated and managed.¹⁵ A shift must be made toward personalized strategies based on patient preferences, readiness to change, and psychosocial variables, all of which are approaches utilized by health coaches to facilitate long-term behavioral changes.¹⁶

Studies have shown that health coaching can be highly effective when focused on developing self-efficacy and skills such as goal setting, problem solving and managing cognitive and emotional barriers.⁵

With expertise in delivering individualized treatment based on a non-judgmental, personal relationship, coupled with expertise in behavior change, fitness, and nutrition, health coaches can serve as invaluable members of the healthcare team, supporting both physicians and patients in increasing quality of care while decreasing costs.

Given the importance of addressing behavioral factors and habits that negatively affect health and well-being, such as physical inactivity and chronic stress, there exists a great opportunity for qualified health coaches to fill a much-needed role in the patient-centered model of care. Studies have shown health coaching to be a particularly effective method for the management of chronic diseases, with documented success in changing chronically ill lifestyle behaviors and improving self-efficacy and physical and mental health status among patients.⁴

“I foresee health coaches being widely accepted as part of the healthcare continuum, working directly with physicians and nurse practitioners, as well as in the corporate fitness arena, to assist individuals with improving their health and well-being, not only for themselves, but also for society at large.”

DEBI PILLARELLA

ACE CERTIFIED HEALTH COACH AND
PROGRAM DIRECTOR AT COMMUNITY HOSPITAL FITNESS POINTE,
A MEDICALLY-BASED FITNESS CENTER IN MUNSTER, IN

Future of the Profession

EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES IN WORKPLACE WELLNESS

About 67% of employers say poor employee health habits are a top challenge with regard to maintaining affordable insurance coverage, as individuals with chronic diseases cost up to an estimated four times more in health insurance expenses than healthy individuals. The insurmountable burden on employers required to pay for increasing healthcare costs has resulted in a widespread search by organizations of various sizes to enlist the services of health coaches to craft solutions that offer long-term, cost-saving results.

From healthier food options offered in on-site cafeterias to physical-activity programs tailored to employee preferences, nearly half of all employers that have instituted workplace wellness programs report a cost savings, with 69% of them citing a marked improvement in employee health. With expertise in motivational interviewing, positive psychology and effective goal-setting, health coaches are able to effectively facilitate workplace wellness programs that accurately address the behaviors that have held team members back from making real change, resulting in increased workforce productivity and decreased healthcare costs.

To enhance the health and wellness of individuals around the world, the mission of ACE is to ensure that all people have access to well-qualified professionals—such as health coaches—to facilitate sustainable change that leads to weight loss, healthy eating, regular physical activity, and overall well-being. To achieve this mission, ACE has served for 30 years as the largest nonprofit health and fitness certification, education, and training organization in the world, with more than 70,000 certified professionals worldwide.

“One of the things I love about my job is the chance to learn about peoples’ current habits and help them change their behaviors so their overall health and quality of life improve.”

ANGEL CHELIK

ACE CERTIFIED HEALTH COACH AND
OWNER OF WORKBETTER WELLNESS, OFFERING ON-SITE
WORKPLACE WELLNESS PROGRAMS,
IN SAN DIEGO, CA

67%
OF EMPLOYERS SAY
POOR EMPLOYEE
HEALTH HABITS ARE A
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Becoming a Health Coach

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF A HEALTH COACH

Certification exams should provide an objective evaluation of an individual's ability to safely perform the job in question. A critical component of the certification process for any profession, including health coaching, is to first conduct a role delineation study in order to identify the primary tasks performed by professionals on a regular basis. The specific tasks and accompanying knowledge and skill-related components are initially established by a role delineation panel of health coaching subject matter experts, whose work is then validated by a sampling of currently practicing health coaches across a wide variety of settings.

The end result is an outline of domains (which represent the major areas of responsibility of the profession), tasks (individual functions for certain aspects of the job), and associated knowledge and skills (necessary to perform the indicated tasks) that serves as the minimum level of proficiency and theoretical knowledge required to practice as a competent and safe health coach.

- + Build Rapport and Facilitate Behavior Change—Use effective communication strategies to build and sustain relationships with individuals and groups by coaching behavioral change.
- + Program Design and Implementation—Create individual and group structured behavior-change programs that focus on lifestyle and weight management through physical activity, nutrition, and education.
- + Program Progression and Adjustments—Monitor, evaluate and modify individual and group structured behavior-change programs designed to improve and maintain health, fitness, weight, body composition, and metabolism.

- + Professionalism and Competency—Fulfill responsibilities through ongoing education, collaboration, and awareness of professional standards and practices necessary to protect clients and patients, the profession, stakeholders, and oneself.

An expanded version of this framework ultimately serves as the blueprint from which the certification exam to become a certified health coach is developed.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CERTIFICATION

One of the most important decisions an aspiring health coach will make as he or she embarks on a career as a health coach is which certification to obtain. While there are a number of certifications available, ranging in title from health coach to wellness coach, the reality is not all offer the same level of professional credibility that is imperative in this evolving field.

“I became a certified health coach to enhance my skills as a registered dietitian and personal trainer in order to help my clients obtain their lifestyle goals by empowering them to make positive changes.”

GINA CROME

ACE CERTIFIED HEALTH COACH, REGISTERED DIETITIAN,
AND OWNER OF LIFESTYLE MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS
BASED IN GLENDORA, CA

Becoming a Health Coach

UNDERSTANDING NCCA-ACCREDITED CERTIFICATIONS

Professional certifications should obtain third-party validation from an independent organization that explicitly accredits certification programs. Originally formed as the National Commission for Health Certifying Agencies with initial funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the now National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) has reviewed and accredited certifications for most allied healthcare professions, including credentials for registered dietitians, athletic trainers, nurse practitioners, and pharmacists, among many others.

ACE, along with other leaders in the health and fitness industry, believes that individuals who are primarily compensated in their role as a coach should attain a nationally accredited professional certification. This can include a health or wellness certification accredited by the NCCA or International Coach Federation (ICF). Presently, ACE is leading the charge in terms of offering a quality solution to the health care crisis by offering the only NCCA-accredited health coach certification.

Obtaining a reputable health-coach certification demonstrates the highest standard of competence for a coaching professional and provides assurance to the general population that you have mastered foundational principles necessary to empower people to positive, long-term, healthy change.

The nation's most respected thinkers
in health and fitness
agree that NCCA accreditation
is the gold standard.

Becoming a Health Coach

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

Given the pivotal role health coaches play in positively impacting the overall health and well-being of the population at large, many reputable health-coaching certifications have specific eligibility requirements that individuals must meet in order to sit for an accredited professional examination. Below are two examples of the pre-requisite requirements for health-coaching certifications offered by respected organizations.

An individual sitting for the ACE Health Coach Certification exam:

- + Must be at least 18 years of age; **and**
- + Must hold a current adult CPR/AED certification with a live skills check; **and**
- + Must submit supporting documentation for one of the following:
 - + Current NCCA-accredited certification[†] or license in fitness, nutrition, healthcare, wellness, human resources, or a related field[‡]; **or**
 - + Hold an associate's degree or higher from an accredited college or university in fitness, exercise science, nutrition, healthcare, wellness, human resources, or a related field[‡]; **or**
 - + Completed a Health Coach training and education program approved by the International Consortium for Health and Wellness Coaches (ICHWC)[‡]; **or**
 - + A minimum of 2 years of documented work experience in coaching, leading, designing, implementing, or facilitating one or more of the following: behavior or lifestyle change, exercise, wellness, nutrition, or physical activity

[†] A list of NCCA-accredited certification programs can be found via the following link: www.credentialingexcellence.org/p/cm/ld/fid=121

[‡] A list of ICHWC-approved training and education programs can be found via the following link: <http://ichwc.org/organizations/>

The health and wellness coach certification offered through Wellcoaches has the following general requirements:

- + A bachelor's degree or higher in an area of health and wellness study; **or**
- + A license or license equivalent related to an area of health and wellness study or health profession; **or**
- + A bachelor's degree or higher in an area of study unrelated to health and wellness and a reputable health- or fitness-related certification; **or**
- + A reputable health- or fitness-related certification and a minimum of 2,000 hours of work experience in the field with individuals or groups

Becoming a Health Coach

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPACT

In the face of an epidemic of lifestyle-related diseases, the impact of health coaching is great. Research shows that adopting sustainable healthy behavior patterns, including regular physical activity and sound nutrition, is key to addressing the obesity epidemic and other lifestyle-related medical conditions.^{17, 18} In light of this, ACE seeks public policies that make highly qualified, science-based, interdisciplinary coaching, counseling, and support for sustainable behavioral change a functional, integral component of the nation's healthcare continuum.

ACE has pressed federal and state government officials to advance public policies that effectively move obesity prevention and intervention into the healthcare system. Specifically, ACE calls for policies that create lasting impact, including, but not limited to:

- + Ensure that obesity intervention and prevention is supported and paid for
- + Recognize and utilize NCCA-accredited health coaches, fitness professionals and other weight-management and behavior-change experts in communities as part of the healthcare continuum
- + Incentivize medical professionals to utilize behavior-change facilitation by well-qualified health and fitness professionals for the large and growing segment of the population at risk for obesity and its co-morbidities

For individuals passionate about shifting the global culture of wellness, there is no better time than now to take the initiative to become a certified health coach, and to guide others toward meaningful health behavior change.

“Hope is the foundation on which all change begins. Being a health coach allows me to experience the unique joy of helping people break the chains of obesity and live the full lives they deserve.”

LEE JORDAN

ACE CERTIFIED HEALTH COACH AND CREATOR OF 30 SECONDS TO VICTORY,
A PHYSICIAN-ENDORSED WELLNESS PROGRAM
BASED IN JACKSONVILLE BEACH, FL

Next Steps

To fulfill the growing need for health coaches in a variety of settings, health coaching certifications have been introduced by a variety of organizations. Only one is accredited by the NCCA, the same body that accredits certifications for pharmacists, nurse practitioners, registered dietitians and many other health professions.

Pursuing an ACE Health Coach Certification means pursuing a quality solution to the healthcare crisis from a trusted name. In addition to being part of the largest nonprofit health and fitness certification, training and education organization in the world, becoming an ACE Certified Health Coach will make you part of an organization that advocates on your behalf every day—among policymakers, among partners who share our vision of eliminating the obesity epidemic, and among employers exploring workplace wellness solutions.

MAKE MOVEMENT YOUR MISSION

For more information on how to become an **ACE[®] Certified Health Coach** contact us at **888.825.3636** or visit [ACEfitness.org](https://www.acefitness.org)

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